White Goods, dark knowing
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There is nothing modest about Derek Kreckler's 2004 series 'White Goods' — in production, scale or intent. The photographs that make up the series are commanding, able to take on the big spaces of the contemporary art museum and gallery. This public space is their home, one they address self-consciously and purposefully like history painting from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The difficulty is that unlike history painting of the past, the historical event and moral story being narrated is not at all obvious. Despite the photographs' explicitly seductive qualities, meaning is not gained readily. 'White Goods' has a different way of elaborating its moral tale, sidestepping any didacticism in favour of suggestion and allusion. Kreckler creates a gap between what we see and what we know, effectively nudging viewers into a realm that is more sensory and psychological than factual. From the state of disorientation in which we find ourselves there can be no relief or escape.

'White Goods' consists of ten horizontally oriented colour photographs, each of a uniform height of 1160 centimetres and of varying widths. In terms of a narrative the images are discontinuous, one does not lead to the other in any linear or logical progression. A refrigerator — the white goods of the title — does not appear in every photograph but is represented often enough to leave no doubt that it is the central motif. People inhabit the settings more often than not, gathered in pairs and small groups. As for the setting itself, it is consistent in feel, although the photographs were shot at multiple locations around Perth and its environs, in daylight and at nighttime under lights. Despite these discontinuities there is a palpable link between the individual photographs in the series. It comes in part from the quaintly old-fashioned clothes and hairstyles of some of those pictured, but mostly from the sense of import the images evoke, of an event that has happened or is about to take place. The nature of the event is unclear, ungraspable, because of the ambiguities and gaps Kreckler has introduced. The people in the photographs could be either the protagonists responsible for the event, or the spectators, or even, conceivably, both. Whatever their roles, they are all locked into the action occurring inside the photographic frame, oblivious to our presence.

There is another level of ambiguity in 'White Goods' that involves timeframe: are the scenes Kreckler has depicted contemporary or do they refer to the past? The 1950s, perhaps, when long dresses and flat-heeled shoes were the fashion. What is clear from first viewing is that the photographs are not 'real'; Kreckler's staging and artifice are upfront and any pretence to realism can be immediately appreciated as deliberately artificial.

Turning away from the photographs for a moment, let's consider what was happening in the larger world between 2002 when Kreckler conceived the idea for 'White Goods', and 2004 when he completed the commission for the 14th Biennale of Sydney: On Reason and Emotion curated by Isabel Carlos.[1] The catastrophic events of September 11, 2001 were still reverberating around the globe. The Liberal Government led by Australian Prime Minister John Howard was providing unqualified support to the United States in the so-called war on terror. In March 2003 Australia had become involved in the second Gulf War as part of the 'coalition of the willing' initiated by the United States, with Great Britain being the other main participant. The rhetoric for invading Iraq once again was that Saddam Hussein's regime was continuing to conceal weapons of mass destruction and to foster links with terrorist groups, including al Qaeda, which had been involved in the 9/11 attacks. David Hicks was already incarcerated in Guantanamo Bay in Cuba, where he would remain until 2007 when he was transferred to prison in Adelaide.

Domestically the situation was deeply troubling as well, with the children overboard debacle of October 2001 still making headlines, along with the ongoing issue of Aboriginal Reconciliation and demands for equality, justice and the end to entrenched disadvantage. In 2003 there was a well-publicised Victorian re-



White Goods #1 from the series 'White Goods', 2004



White Goods #2 from the series 'White Goods', 2004



White Goods #3 from the series ‘White Goods’, 2004



White Goods #4 from the series ‘White Goods’, 2004



White Goods #5 from the series ‘White Goods’, 2004



White Goods #6 from the series ‘White Goods’, 2004

view of the implementation of the recommendations of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (1991); the rates of imprisonment of Indigenous people were continuing to grow and deaths in custody were still occurring.

At the same time signs of climate change were becoming worryingly obvious with recorded declines in sea ice at the poles and negative impacts on some plants and animal species. In 2003 the size of the hole in the ozone layer was a particular preoccupation: that year, according to scientists from NASA and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), it was the second largest ever observed (the first was in 2000). The loss of ozone in the atmosphere was a proven effect of human action, caused by the emission of chlorofluorocarbons, also known as CFCs, which had played an integral role in refrigeration and air conditioning. While their use was being phased out as a result of the 1988 Montreal Protocol, there was a delay in the recovery of the atmosphere.

For Kreckler, who was then living in Perth and teaching sound design for theatre and film at the Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts, these global, international and domestic politics were among the larger forces shaping his life views and art practice. But the domestic refrigerator he chose as his central symbol suggests much more than the destructive environmental effects of consumerism and our infatuation with all manner of white goods. Kreckler emphasises that his major concern with this series was actually responding to place. His conception of place, however, has less to do with geography or nationhood than it does with history — colonial history in particular and the violent dispossession of Aboriginal people across the country caused by the invasion of white settlers. In recognising the continuing impact of destructive past actions on the present, Kreckler was far from alone. Artists Tracey Moffatt, Darren Siwes, Sue Ford, Anne Ferran and Rosemary Laing were also dealing with these issues in their work in the early 2000s although their approaches were very different. Kreckler shared with Moffatt and Laing the use of performers and the appeal to a cinematic dimension in the creation and scale of his images.

In 'White Goods' the scraggly settings, which are generically Australian rather than specifically local, provide the stage for Kreckler's Australian story — a story that operates in a non-didactic, allusive mode to unsettle appearances and worry away at viewers. The refrigerator isn't in a suburban home kitchen where it belongs but has been dislodged and displaced and now appears ruined. Bizarrely suspended it evokes an unseen act of violence, one that has either occurred recently (the crowd is still gathered as part of the spectacle, as witnesses and actors in the event) or at some unspecified time in the past (hanging on ropes from Whiteman's bridge it doesn't attract the attention of those enjoying the water or the view and is apparently noticed only by us). In the crowd scenes where the refrigerator hangs a weird inversion occurs: in the absence of Aboriginal people, in their erasure, the white goods are somehow transposed into a black body. The hanging deaths of Aboriginal people in both the historical past and the contemporary moment come to mind. This is no accident. Kreckler drew from a deep reservoir of historical imagery for the series, including the hugely confronting photographs of lynchings of African Americans published in James Allen's book *Without Sanctuary* (1999). What particularly struck Kreckler about the photographs from Allen's collection was the crowd's casualness and total lack of empathy for the victims; he incorporated some of the onlookers' gestures and their groupings into his own choreography.

In his essay 'Derek Kreckler: Allegories of Vision' in the 2004 Biennale of Sydney catalogue, Blair French convincingly argues that it isn't only the white goods metaphor that 'crystalises in a disturbing fashion' in relation to hanged bodies. It is also the spaces or sites in the photographs which serve as a reminder of 'one of the largest real estate frauds in history'. French writes:



Holey #1 from the series 'Holey, 2003

As these images attest, if the wilful cultural amnesia of *terra nullius* is to be consistently challenged, as it must, there can be no images here in Australia of meaningless, empty spaces. Indeed there are no spaces left unstained by the events of history or unable in some way to evoke its lingering effects upon our consciousness.[2]

This is not to preclude other readings of 'White Goods'. Isabel Carlos, for example, saw the series as being more global than local, more concerned with consumerism than any particular aspects of Australian history. Of the photographs she commented that 'people look at battered fridges as if they were mysterious white gods'.[3] Regardless of where the interpretative emphasis lies, the series communicates a sense of unease and what Kreckler himself describes as 'dark unknowing'. It is conveyed through the surface prettiness of his palette, the floral prints of the girls' dresses, and the sweet appearance of the youthful subjects.

In keeping with its kinship with history painting, and the desire to produce work of public, moral consequence, 'White Goods' was the most ambitious photographic project Kreckler had produced up till then. His process was cinematic and theatrical, reflecting his work in performance art and theatre. It also built on his visual arts training in sculpture and his conception of sculpture's radical, expanded possibilities.[4] Kreckler dreamt up the images, drew them and orchestrated the elements that brought them into being. He contracted the services of a film producer, a casting agent, prop makers and some friends. Costumes were sourced from opportunity shops and the participants themselves. Thirty people in total were involved in the project; they were not the characters in Kreckler's moral drama but what he describes as 'the players'. Kreckler, by then a seasoned performance artist, didn't appear in front of the camera and assumed the role of director rather than participant. In creating his scenes he instituted a dialectical relationship between staged naturalism







White Goods #7, #8 and #9 from the 'White Goods' series, 2004

and the operation of chance. The pre-arranged poses he devised were drawn not only from historical photographic material but also from popular culture, including advertising imagery and television shows such as Neighbours. The aim was to achieve a relaxed look, one that was credible in its everydayness. The unscripted movements of players who were not told what to do were crucial for the end result, introducing a subtle, rippling energy into the imagery that is fundamental to Kreckler's work overall. This quality reflects his intimate knowledge of naturalism in theatre where something lifelike can emerge from within highly staged scenarios.[5]

The particularity of this energy goes to the core of Kreckler's conceptualist legacy and his concern with the complex interactions between instruction and freedom, between fixity and randomness. Throughout his career he has been careful to distinguish his efforts from the Sol LeWitt mode of conceptualism, where the outcome is predetermined by the artist, aligning himself instead with the approach of Jeff Wall whose work appears more 'natural'. Mike Parr has argued that 'Kreckler's work is very different from iconic conceptual art', such as that of Joseph Kosuth and John Baldessari, 'while [it] can look like conceptual art, it isn't, if only because it assumes conceptual art as a convention'.[6]

'White Goods' followed on from the series 'Holey', which also had a high profile public presence through its inclusion in the Clemenger Award at the National Gallery of Victoria in 2003. 'Holey' is more overt in its conceptualism; the photographic image is broken up by circles that appear as blanks in the image and the missing images from the circles are reformed as three-dimensional spherical objects displayed on a low plinth nearby. It is also more playful and sweeter than 'White Goods', which is underpinned by a dark, psychic undercurrent. However, the two works are united in significant ways. As Isobel Crombie notes, 'Holey' 'invites the viewer to take on an active relationship as they look at the photographs, giving them the chance to imaginatively reassemble the "missing" pieces of the images in their mind'.[7] In 'White Goods' there is no interruption to the photographic image or emulsion but something vital is also missing — readily accessible legibility or 'meaning'. In neither series is it possible to take photography or the photograph as a given.

'Holey' relates to 'White Goods' in another profound way. When Parr selected the series for his Artist's choice section in *Art and Australia* in 2004 he suggested that Kreckler deals with the loss of the real that we all experience. Parr quotes Rainer Maria Rilke: 'We come too late for the Gods/And too early for Being.'

He argues that Kreckler therefore exposes a 'missed encounter with the real' through the staging of his imagery for the camera, knowing that what he creates and what is pictured can only ever be partial, incomplete and inadequate in terms of representation.[8]

'White Goods' is arguably the work where the inadequacy of photography, of a visual image, is at its most acute. It is also the darkest work Kreckler has produced to date. There is no narrative climax or conclusion to the series, no way out from the photographs. In them violence is not physically visible but its effects are omnipresent and the gathered crowd, though not hostile or aggressive, suffers from perpetual indifference. The presence of the sweet little lamb that makes her way towards us while the crowd looks steadfastly the other way is not enough to change the tone and quell what feels to me like disturbance. But there is something relatively concrete — the moral and political basis to the photographs that reflect Kreckler's ambition to produce work of consequence, with currency in and relevance to contemporary culture. As Kreckler has so eloquently said, 'we are still making ghosts'.[10]

[1] Six photographs from the series 'White Goods' were shown at the Museum of Contemporary Art as part of the 14th Biennale of Sydney: On Reason and Emotion (2004). The work was discussed in Blair French's catalogue essay, 'Derek Kreckler: Allegories of Vision', in Isabel Carlos (ed.), 14th Biennale of Sydney: On Reason and Emotion, exhibition catalogue, 2004, pp.130–33.

[2] French, p.130.

[3] Carlos, p.26.

[4] Kreckler studied sculpture in his undergraduate degree at the South Australian School of Art. One of his fellow students was David Watt who was also interested in sculpture as a radical practice that included performance.

[5] In particular, Kreckler acknowledges the importance of Samuel Beckett for what he describes as 'the incorporation of form with content'. Personal correspondence with the author, 20 May 2015.

[6] Mike Parr, 'Holysmoke: Artist's choice', Art and Australia, vol. 42, no. 2, 2004, p.204.

[7] Isobel Crombie, 'Derek Kreckler', 2003 Clemenger Art Award, National Gallery of Victoria, p.22.

[8] Parr, p.204.

[9] Conversation with the author, 17 May 2015.



White Goods #10 from the series 'White Goods', 2004